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ABSTRACT

In the fourth grade, 38% of all children have reading skills below the "basic" level, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Many of these students are recommended for special education services because of their reading difficulties. Recent research on reading difficulties in young children demonstrates that early intervention can correct reading deficiencies in all but about 3% to 5% of children. States can use several strategies to build literacy skills and lower special education referrals. Among these are: make state reading standards correspond with current research about reading growth from kindergarten through grade 3; improve the teacher's reading preparation; provide professional development opportunities in reading; and strengthen and expand early intervention programs. (Contains 12 notes.) (NKA)

R. V. Bond

Issue Brief

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Improving Early Literacy Skills to Reduce Special Education Referrals*

Summary

Thirty-eight percent of all fourth-grade children have reading skills below the "basic" level, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Many of these students are recommended for special education services because of their reading difficulties. Recent research on reading difficulties in young children demonstrates that early intervention can correct reading deficiencies in all but about 3 percent to 5 percent of children.¹ States can use several strategies to build literacy skills and lower special education referrals.

- **Make state reading standards correspond with current research about reading growth from kindergarten through grade three.** Many reading standards for the early elementary grades are based on outdated theories of reading development. States should examine their reading standards to ensure they reflect research conducted in the last 15 years.
- **Improve teacher's reading preparation.** Many states require only one survey course in reading instruction before certification. This does not adequately prepare teachers for the complex task of adapting reading instruction to the needs of all children.
- **Provide professional development opportunities in reading.** Two recent national reports highlight the need to upgrade the skills of current teachers so they can adapt instruction to the needs of all children.
- **Strengthen and expand early intervention programs.** Services provided under Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Act can be helpful in reducing later referrals for special education in reading, but the number of children served in this program is small compared with the number of children at risk for reading difficulties.

The Problem

Thirty-eight percent of all fourth-grade children have reading skills below the "basic" level, meaning they are not able to read well enough to complete grade-level assignments.² Many students reading below grade level are referred for special education services, and approximately 80 percent of all special education referrals for learning disabilities result from children's reading difficulties.

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Current research indicates it is more difficult to bring children's reading skills up to grade level once they have struggled to read for several years than it is to prevent the occurrence of the reading difficulties.³ Moreover, building early literacy skills can prevent reading difficulties in children who would otherwise be at risk for special education referral.⁴

Why are poor literacy outcomes so widespread?

The causes of poor literacy outcomes in the nation's schools are complex, but they include at least the following factors.⁵

Many children with otherwise normal intellectual abilities have specific weaknesses in certain language abilities that are required for reading. Learning to read requires different skills than learning oral language, so some children who easily learn oral language have a more difficult time learning to read. For these children, learning to read is a very challenging and prolonged intellectual task. They are genuinely "reading disabled" and require extensive instruction to acquire adequate reading skills. Current estimates suggest that although severe language deficits only occur in 3 percent to 5 percent of the population, as many as 20 percent of schoolchildren are affected to some extent by linguistic weaknesses that make learning to read a difficult task.⁶

Many children come to school unprepared to learn to read. Some children come to school with most of the knowledge and language skills required in learning to read. Other children have large gaps in their knowledge and language skills that must be addressed through extra learning opportunities. These gaps include an absence of general oral language skills (e.g., vocabulary and grammar), a limited knowledge of letters, and inadequate sensitivity to the sound structure of words.

Many elementary schools are ill-equipped to provide extra resources for struggling students. Some children require more intensive, explicit, and supportive instruction than others, and schools frequently are not organized to meet the needs of all children. Some of the difficulty arises from the lack of adequately prepared teachers and some arises from insufficient class time focused on literacy. A substantial proportion of children who fail to acquire adequate literacy skills in elementary school simply need more focused instructional time and practice than they are receiving.

Teachers frequently do not possess the special knowledge or teaching skills required to effectively teach children who have trouble learning to read. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, a recent report from the National Research Council, suggests that the first step in preventing reading difficulties in many children is to improve the quality and consistency of reading instruction in regular kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade classrooms. Many teachers currently employed to teach reading to young children are not aware of advances in reading instruction research that have occurred within the last 15 years. These critical elements of instruction are particularly important in assisting children who are struggling with learning to read.

Teachers frequently do not have adequate materials available to them to effectively promote literacy in all children. Teachers should utilize modern curriculum materials that incorporate current knowledge of reading instruction. Many of these materials are specifically directed to the needs of struggling beginning readers and are not in widespread use in U.S. schools.

Many schools' prescreening activities are not identifying students with disabilities. Services under Part B—for children ages three through five—and Part C—for children from birth through age two—of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act may be helpful in reducing later referrals for special education in reading. Many preschool screening activities do not distinguish between students with disabilities and those with reading difficulties, partly because of insufficient preparation of school staff conducting the screenings.

State Efforts to Improve Reading Difficulties

California and **Texas** are leading the way with initiatives focused on improving literacy outcomes. There are considerable differences in the two states' initiatives, but they share at least four important features.

Both states have made a significant investment in professional development to improve the knowledge and skills of teachers of kindergarten through grade two. California has made substantial funds available to local school districts to contract with designated in-service providers for training in local school districts. Texas has worked through the reading center at the University of Texas to produce training materials that are offered to all teachers in the state.⁷

Both states have produced detailed standards for reading achievement in the early elementary grades. These standards reflect current research-based knowledge about the skills that must be developed during each developmental period for children to acquire effective reading skills by grade three. The standards also guide the selection of curriculum materials; both states require all curriculum materials recommended for adoption to contain instruction that is explicitly focused on state standards in reading at each grade level. Finally, the standards guide statewide assessments in reading.

Both states have produced guidance documents that describe the elements of effective instruction and school organization required to increase literacy outcomes for all children. Texas' *Beginning Reading Instruction: Components and Features of a Research-Based Reading Program* contains major sections outlining twelve essential components of research-based programs for beginning reading instruction and eight features of classrooms and campuses that support effective beginning reading instruction. California's document, *Teaching Reading: A Balanced, Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Reading in Prekindergarten Through Grade Three*, outlines critical elements of instruction for young children.

Both states have articulated very clear guidelines to publishers for the development of instructional materials that can be purchased with state funds. These requirements reflect current research-based understanding of the critical elements of early literacy instruction for all children. They also match state standards for reading development.

In addition, Texas supported the development and validation of the "Texas Primary Reading Inventory."⁸ This instrument is made available to all schools for screening and diagnostic assessment in kindergarten through grade two. It enables a brief screening of all children beginning in kindergarten and a more extensive assessment of children who fall below empirically based cut-off scores. The process significantly improves the efficiency of the early testing by focusing most of the testing time on children who are at significant risk for reading failure.⁹

A third state, **Alabama**, offers a good model for smaller states with fewer resources. The core activity of the Alabama initiative is a series of 10-day summer academies for elementary school faculty who have made a commitment to participate in the reading initiative. In summer 1998, 16 schools (14 elementary, 1 middle, and 1 high) agreed to serve as "literacy demonstration sites" and took part in this training; 65 more schools were trained in summer 1999. An additional 186 schools were added during the summer of 2000. Currently, there are 229 elementary, 29 middle, and 9 high schools participating in the Alabama Reading Initiative. The plan for 2001 is to add another 165 schools. The program was funded entirely through private donations in its first two years. In fiscal 2000, the state budget for the program was \$6 million, and the state budget for fiscal 2001 is \$10 million. An important feature of this initiative is that each literacy demonstration site forms an ongoing relationship with one of Alabama's institutions of higher education to provide teacher mentoring and support.¹⁰

Recommendations for State Policymakers

State policymakers may want to consider these strategies to reduce the number of children referred for special education services by more effectively building early literacy skills in all children.

- **Examine state reading standards to verify they correspond with current research about the essential elements of reading growth from kindergarten through grade three.** Many reading standards for the early elementary grades are based on outdated theories of reading development that have been made obsolete by research conducted in the last 15 years. For example, new standards for early literacy growth should include benchmarks for achievement in phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, concepts about print, vocabulary, and syntactic development for kindergarten children. This level of specificity in word and text skills should continue through the early elementary grades.
- **Supplement existing statewide standardized reading tests with support for schools to provide an assessment of critical early reading skills in kindergarten through grade three.** The purpose of the assessment should be primarily to guide instruction and identify children in need of extra instructional support to prevent reading difficulties. Reading tests should demonstrate that they are reliable and valid in the early identification of children at risk for reading failure.
- **Provide reading instruction professional development opportunities for teachers.** The area in need of immediate attention is training for instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and other word-reading strategies that have been neglected in university-based teacher training in the recent past. Two recent national reports highlight the lack of teacher knowledge of these elements of reading instruction as well as the urgent need to upgrade the skills of current teachers so they can adapt instruction to the needs of all children.¹¹
- **Improve teachers' reading preparation.** Along with improving professional development for existing teachers, states may want to consider examining the requirements for preservice training in elementary education. Many states require only one survey course in reading instruction before certification. This does not adequately prepare teachers for the complex task of adapting reading instruction to the needs of all children.

- **Ensure state-supported reading curriculum materials are consistent with current research.** One way to improve reading instruction in the early elementary grades is for states to require reading curriculum materials that reflect the current research-based understanding of the critical elements of early reading instruction.
- **Provide more intensive, explicit, and supportive instruction for children who fall behind in the acquisition of critical early reading skills.** Prevention research indicates that most children who do not keep pace with their peers in the development of early literacy skills in the classroom can benefit from more intensive instructional experiences. Options to provide this additional instruction for at-risk children include volunteer mentors, trained paraprofessionals, and highly experienced certified teachers. Approaches that maximize instructional time, provide the most explicit and systematic instruction, and involve well-trained and supervised instructors consistently produce the best results.
- **Strengthen and expand existing early intervention programs.** The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires all states to provide a free, appropriate, public education designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities. Services provided under Part C (i.e., identification and early intervention of children with disabilities) may be helpful in reducing later referrals for special education in reading, but the number of children served in this program is small compared with the number of children at risk for reading difficulties. States should carefully examine preschool screening practices and services provided under Part B to maximize the impact of these public preschool programs on literacy-related language skills. A recent report of the National Research Council points out that a stronger focus on emergent literacy skills, both in preschool settings and with families, is a critical supplement to early intervention programs for school-age children.¹²

Endnotes

¹ J.K. Torgesen, "Individual Differences in Responding to Early Interventions in Reading: The Lingering Problem of Treatment Resisters," *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice* 15 (2000): 55-64.

² National Center for Education Statistics, *NAEP 1998 Reading: A Report Card for the Nation and the States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

³ J.K. Torgesen, C.A. Rashotte, and A. Alexander, "Principles of Fluency Instruction in Reading: Relationships with Established Empirical Outcomes," in *Time, Fluency, and Developmental Dyslexia*, ed. M. Wolf (Parkton, Md.: York Press, in press).

⁴ J.K. Torgesen, "Catch Them before They Fall: Identification and Assessment to Prevent Reading Failure in Young Children," *American Educator* 22 (spring/summer 1998): 32-39.

⁵ C.E. Snow, M.S. Burns, and P. Griffin, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998).

⁶ S.E. Shaywitz, M.D. Excoabar, and B.A. Shaywitz et al., "Evidence that Dyslexia May Represent the Lower Tail of a Normal Distribution of Reading Disability," *New England Journal of Medicine* 326 (1992): 145-50.

⁷ For example, in summer 1999, kindergarten teachers in Texas had the opportunity to attend four-day "kindergarten academies" that were conducted in each region of the state. Individuals already trained in the use of an extensive manual and set of videotapes led the academies, so content was uniform throughout the academies. In summer 2000, first-grade teachers received similar four-day training sessions that covered topics in bilingualism and language diversity; features of effective instruction; identification of dyslexia; phonological awareness; the alphabetic principle, word study, and spelling; fluency; comprehension; and written expression. Teachers received a stipend of \$600 for completing the four-day training academies.

⁸ Texas Education Agency, "Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) 1999-2000 School Edition" (Austin, Texas).

⁹ Both California and Texas maintain extensive Web sites containing information on their reading initiatives. The address for the California site is <www.cde.ca.gov/cilbranch/eltdiv/rdg_init.htm>; the address for the Texas site is <www.tea.state.tx.us/reading/>.

¹⁰ The Web site for the Alabama initiative is <www.aplusala.org/docs/reports/reading/>.

¹¹ National Reading Panel, *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000); and Torgesen, Rashotte, and Alexander.

¹² Snow et al.

This *Issue Brief* was written by Joseph Torgesen of Florida State University and was edited by Mark Ouellette of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.